

A New Direction

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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One thing that Unitarian Universalists love to do is to lift up famous and important UUs. I don't know perhaps it is in the secret hope that one day when we become famous that someone will put our name on a T-shirt or coffee mug. Sort of the Mt. Rushmore of our tradition. One such person is L. Frank Baum, a Unitarian whose name may or may not be readily available to you, but I am sure you know his creation. He was the author of a series of children's books that inspired a movie: the Wizard of Oz. Baum was a Midwesterner who made up bedtime stories for his kids and eventually got them published. Baum was famous in his own right in the early part of the twentieth century as an author. However, these days it is hard to think of the Wizard of Oz without recalling the movie with its great music, the drama of its story, and the imagination that went into creating this whole alternate reality.

It is impossible for me to talk about the Wizard of Oz without sounding like some old codger. In my day the Wizard of Oz was an event. We didn't have any of the VCRs and DVDs you have now; we

had to wait for it to come on TV. And we didn't have no TiVo either, we had to watch the commercials and like it! My cousins and I would gather around the TV and us older kids would try to scare the younger ones when the witch would come by. But all of us got swept up in the drama of this movie. It is a hero's journey through a strange and dangerous land in an attempt to simply get home. It has been compared to the Odyssey. George Lucas admits that the Wizard of Oz was one of his primary influences in creating Star Wars. Like those hero tales, Dorothy first escapes her home, but then wants nothing more than to return to it. Kansas becomes a symbol of perfection, enlightenment, all that is right with the world. The only way she can get there is by finding the wizard who lives in the emerald city of Oz. And how does one get to Oz? Follow the yellow brick road!

Ah yes the journey to Oz. The journey or Odyssey is so central to many of the world's great myths. Yes this is a myth: a story that is not historically true, but true in the sense that it reveals a deeper truth to us. It contains spiritual truth. Journeys can be primarily about an individual, or they can be undertaken by a group of individuals such as in the Canterbury Tales. So even whole congregations take a journey together through the wild forest of living trees, take a nap in the field of poppies, and resume their quest collectively. Dorothy does not journey by herself. That is very important. Life together as a congregation, as a

religious community that walks together in the covenant of Unitarian Universalism, is on a journey too.

But the journey we take as a congregation is different than Dorothy's. In many ways Dorothy has it easy. Her goal is clear: get to Oz so that I can finally return to Kansas. I have been to Kansas many times, and it is a nice place, but it isn't worth battling witches to get there! The point is not what her goal is, but that she had such a clear vision of where she wanted to go. So often in real life that is where we get hung up. We need a clear sense of where to go, which direction to take. Which leads me to the other advantage Dorothy has over us—the yellow brick road. Oh that the path forward in life were so clearly marked! Once we have a vision before us the next problem is figuring out how to get there. Which one is the path for us?

Actually, most journeys we take in this world, both collectively and individually, feel more like Edwin Muir's reading this morning. We know we are moving forward somehow, in some direction, but we don't know which one. Can't we go the way we used to go? No. Why not just stay here, why try to move forward at all? That is tempting; to find a restful spot. It is comfortable here, don't move me. This is called "congregational survival mode." Let's just get by with what we know and not risk the perils of the journey. It is actually pretty common, and following a period of upheaval, very understandable that churches shift into survival mode. It is a kind of default setting. A new vision will

cost too much money, take up too much time, and risk too much of what we love. Perhaps this is a familiar sentiment to some of you.

When I first came here to First Unitarian Church, I noticed a deep sense of restlessness. That it was time to move past congregational survival mode. You learned, as all travelers do, that the rest is only temporary. “Stand still and set my face. Stay here, forever stay.” “Oh but None stays here, none. The Road leaps on.” The status quo had been good enough for too long. We need a new direction.

Restlessness in church is a good thing. Those of us who are the parents of small children may not think that restlessness in church is a good thing, but that is not exactly what I mean! I mean a collective restlessness. Despite her longing to return to her home, Dorothy begins her journey with this restlessness. A sense that her home was not enough. Life was literally in black and white, and she needed to experience some color. She had a sense that there was something somewhere over the rainbow. So she runs away, to seek out she knows not what. So begins a new life for her, and it starts with restlessness. Complacency in church is the first stage of rigor mortis in a congregation. Restlessness for that new vision that leads us in a new direction is the journey toward life and all of its blessings.

I am so blessed to be your Senior Minister. I have had a number of sentimental moments over the past couple of weeks realizing that it was

about this time last year that I interviewed for this job. It was about this time last year that I first came to see this church, and get to know the folks on the Search Committee and, like Dorothy, dream a bit about what life would be like on the other side of the rainbow in Wilmington Delaware. I feel so blessed to be here. The decision to open this new chapter of my ministry is something I am grateful for every day. We have accomplished so much in just the past few months of my arrival.

We have started new teams, new groups of lay leaders who specialize in membership, leadership, and stewardship. We even have a new group working on the building and the grounds. These four teams are invaluable, and the work they are beginning is inspiring to me.

We have a Wednesday Night worship and program night. It is fun and vital, if you have not been to a Wednesday Night yet, I urge you to try it. I had a fantastic time a couple of weeks ago when I lead the service. And the food is excellent.

There is so much that happens behind the scenes at church. What I sometimes refer to as how the sausage gets made. We have created a new fund for capital improvements which we used to fix a leaky roof. Not very visible, but quite needed. Another invisible thing we did, which is actually one of the things I am the proudest of, is address our budget deficit. When I first arrived here there was a 48 thousand dollar gap between income and expense expected for this budget year. Now

with three months to go, we think we will have closed that gap: if everyone continues to pay on their pledge for this year. This is thanks to the generosity of groups like the Women's Alliance, the Bookcorner, and other individuals. But we have also been stewarding our resources very well to keep expenses under control. How many businesses or non-profit organizations who anticipated a budget shortfall before the economy went bad, can say that they might just close the gap anyway? Not too many I would guess.

That is our journey so far. We are not yet to Oz. The way leads on. There is still so much to accomplish I have to keep reminding myself that we can't do it all in one year. We need to build on the successes of this year. We have some important things in store for next year's budget too. I want to mention just a few of these. These are the things that are possible if we have the courage to take that journey together through the visionary giving of our members and friends.

There are plans for a new website. This is the primary way in which churches do publicity and outreach in the 21st Century. It will be geared primarily to visitors and people unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism. Our presence on the internet can inform but can also inspire and draw people toward Unitarian Universalism in our community.

We can support new members and people visiting us to find a spiritual home at First Unitarian Church. This is the concrete practice of radical hospitality: making room for the full humanity of the stranger. Some of those new teams I mentioned a moment ago are already working on new ways to help make our church more welcoming and inviting to new people, and to create a nurturing atmosphere for everyone, new and experienced member alike, to feel at home and to be inspired by this faith community. This effort will require leadership. The good news is that we have a Membership Coordinator who can provide that leadership, but we don't get enough of her. This new budget widens Susan's hours and responsibilities so that her talents are utilized to their maximum effect.

Speaking of maximizing the talents of our staff for maximum effect, let's talk about religious exploration. So many people tell me that one of the things that first brought them to church was their children. I have heard story after story about a child who goes over to a friend's house to play and finds out from their friend, and in some versions of the story the friend's parents, that this child is going to hell. Disturbed by this news, the child goes to their parents and starts asking: what is hell? Who is God? What do we believe? Without ready answers that could be explained at a child's level, these parents find their way to our doors. Help me! This spiritual journey my child is on has started earlier than I thought it would, and I need guidance for them, and for me.

That is what our religious exploration program does. It teaches kids, sure, but it also is a support for parents and families. So many of you have told me what an extraordinary job Catherine Williamson does, and I agree. But Catherine is bogged down in putting together binders and assembling kits for Sunday morning. With a little administrative help, she would be freed up to provide even more visionary leadership to our RE program. We can go to the next level.

Finally, the last yellow brick in the road to Oz is Rev. Barbara. She has served this congregation so well for seven years. Her ministry of pastoral care and healing has been the thread that held the church together during some of the most trying days of the past five years. The good feeling and vitality that we are experiencing right now is a direct result of her hard work and compassion. She has helped heal wounds, mend broken hearts, and strengthen our congregational covenant. According the UUA guidelines, Barbara is the furthest behind of anyone on our staff in terms of compensation. While we can't do it all in one year, this next year we plan on expressing our gratitude to our Minister of Pastoral Care and Programs in the way that we need to.

That is the road ahead. That is what Oz will look like if we had a financial commitment that was at a visionary level. But like Dorothy's trip to Oz, there are some challenges in our path to get there. We have to overcome a few flying monkeys before we get to Oz.

Actually the first challenge is less of a flying monkey and more like the wicked witch herself. The nation's economy has sent us all into uncertain times. The wicked witch of Wall Street! I hardly need to reiterate to you what you read in the newspapers or see on the news channels. Or even worse, what you have experienced yourself. Even if you have not had wages cut or a job lost, it is the fear that it could happen that is the real enemy. Fear is always an enemy. It is what gives the witch her true power.

I believe that the only way to overcome fear is with hope. That is what we say every Sunday in our Unison Affirmation. People in hard times come to their church for solace. We need to ban together in hard times. Only together, through generous gifts of time, talent, and yes money, can we be that shelter for people affected by tough times in their lives.

Another flying monkey to battle on our way to Oz is income. We have lived on some income streams this year that will not be available to us next year. There were good reasons for doing this, but we need to make up a significant amount of money in pledges this year even before we get to all of the visionary items I mentioned a moment ago. But do not despair! Before today we received advanced pledges from some of our top givers, and before one pledge steward makes one visit, I am happy to announce that we are already almost a quarter of the way to our

goal. That is a good sign. But we need everyone to help us achieve this year's goal. We need all of your help to get to Oz.

The last flying monkey in our way is frustrated pledge stewards. This year we are doing a face to face canvass. Pledge stewards will be calling you to set up meetings to talk, not only about money, but also about your hopes, fears, concerns, and vision for where our church could go in its new direction. We want to hear those things. We have not sent these people to the Glengarry Glenross school for shaking down church people! This is not a strong arm sales pitch. It is simply a conversation about what the church means to you, and how you can help it get there through your financial commitment. So please, return the phone calls, e-mails, or even one on one conversations. Most of all have fun! This is a special time. While I am making naked pleas to the congregation, do turn in your pledge cards nice and early. Give them to your pledge steward at the end of the visit. It will feel so good. They are there to do you a favor: to help you overcome your procrastination! It is a ministry really.

People have asked me, why are you, the Senior Minister, running the stewardship campaign this year? No Senior Minister has ever done that. There are a lot of reasons I could give, but the one that truly matters is that I volunteered to do it because I love this church. You have become my church. Yes, I get paid through your gifts, but I am making my pledge to First Unitarian Church because of all that I get in

return. My family gets a new community in a new state where we don't know anyone. We get support for our son, and our soon to be newborn son, through a group of people who care about their spiritual lives as much as Sharon and I do. I love this church, and I believe in its mission. That is why I am making my contribution this year.

Sheldon Kopp points out that the true religious teacher has no magical powers other than the ability to reveal to the student their own potential. In this case, the Wizard of Oz is not the phony he first appears to be. He actually does help the Lion, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and Dorothy herself realize that the journey was necessary only to reveal that which was already there. So too is our journey. Our new direction is before us. We need only your commitment to move us along it. If we truly believe in the vision and values of our church than that new reality can become true through the simple act of giving. Come my friends, the way leads on. Amen Blessed Be.